

...offering
information &
inspiration
to individuals with
disabilities and
their families
as they direct their
own supports and
services



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Mary K. Schmitt Writing the Story of Her Life

Mary Schmitt is a writer. One of her favorite books is *Gone with the Wind*, the epic Margaret Mitchell novel of Scarlett O'Hara set during the Civil War. Using her computer, Mary has written chapters detailing her own life story and, with the help of friends, plans on trying to publish a book. Like *Gone with the Wind*, it will likely be long book because there is a lot to tell - much of it having happened since she began directing her own services and managing her own budget.

"Before self-determination, life wasn't so good for me," said Mary. "There wasn't much going on in New Jersey for people with disabilities."

But for the last ten years, Mary has been in self-directed services, working with Neeta Das, a support broker whom Mary hired to help her manage her own budget and direct her own supports. Today, Mary is busy and well connected in her community, with a rich tapestry of friends and family.

Mary graduated from public high school in 1968 and has been in a series of workshops and other sheltered job settings since then. "I can't tell you the names of all of them," she laughs, "because they all sound kind of the same...Opportunities...Horizons...Center..." For the last 12 years, she has been with Employment Horizons, a Morris County OTC program, where she does assembly work. "I like it there," said Mary, "because I have friends."

When Mary first got involved in self-directed services, she knew she wanted to live on her own in an apartment, like her sisters did when they moved out. "I went out week after week with Neeta to look at apartments. It was tough, but I found a perfect apartment a short walk from my sister Heidi's house. I was so happy."

Neeta Das agrees. "What was really wonderful about this move," added Neeta, "was the connection it built between Mary and Heidi." At the time, Heidi was pregnant and when the baby was born, Mary helped her a lot, watching the baby so Heidi could rest. "Everyone thought that Mary would benefit from living near her sister, but as it turned out both sisters really benefited," said Neeta.

"... Mary is a very goal-oriented visionary woman ...She has always set small goals for herself and worked hard to achieve them. Her goal now is to get back out on her own and write this book. She really wants to help other people live a life of selfdirection..."

- Neeta Das,
Support Broker

continues on page 2

Mary Schmitt: Her Life. Her Story

"I kept it very neat and tidy," Mary said proudly. Mary especially enjoyed having parties at her home. "I used to host the 'hostess club' meetings every month. I loved being a good hostess. I always welcomed people into my apartment to visit me because I knew they wanted to live on their own, too, but were afraid. I helped them and gave them support to have their own home like mine."

"It was a wonderful five years," recalled Neeta. "Mary really enjoyed having an apartment."

But things change. According to Neeta, Mary's mental illness caused her to withdraw and regress. Her family was concerned and it was decided that Mary should move back home with her parents until she was feeling better. With intensive support from friends, family and staff, Mary is now back to a point where she is ready to live on her own again.

This time, she knows exactly what she wants. "I know I want a condo," she said with confidence. "I want to have a dog because I love Westies." Mary also knows she does not want to live alone this time. "I know I want a roommate. It could be a college student or someone in self-directed services," said Mary. "I just want someone to do things with, like going bowling and to the movies."

One of Mary's greatest challenges is getting to all the places she wants to go. She does not drive and public transportation in Morris County is not adequate. She is without a personal assistant right now, and has to rely on friends and her support broker to help her get around. "This is a real problem for me," said Mary.

In addition to her network of friends, Mary's family is very supportive and remains close. Her three siblings have remained part of her support system. In fact, at one point, Mary's sister Heidi was hired as her personal assistant. "My family has grown closer now because they see that I can live independently with the right support," said Mary. "They believe in me."

Today, Mary believes in herself, too. For the last 11 years, she has been a member of Unity Club, a self-advocacy group in Morris County, and Advocates in Action. She especially enjoys the social aspect of being involved with the clubs, and she loves attending conferences. "You learn a lot of stuff, like how to get along with people. You get to meet people from all over the place," she added.

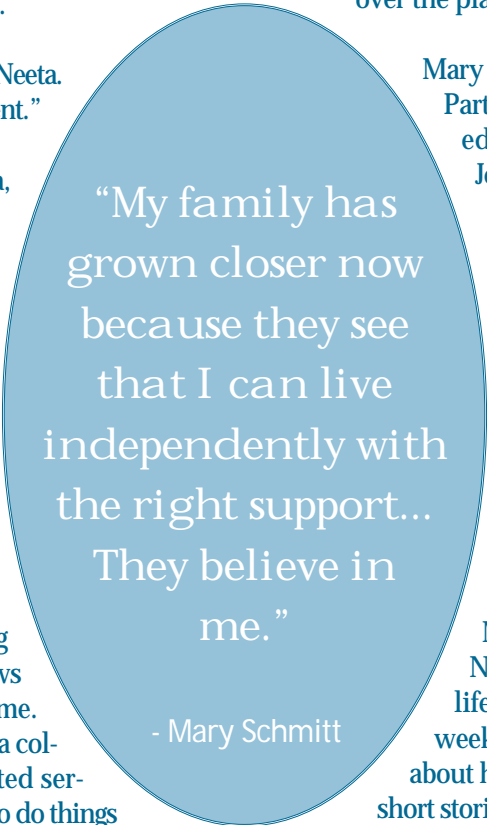
Mary has participated in Project Take Charge and Partners in Policy Making, two advocacy oriented training programs sponsored by the New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities. "I loved them both because I learned how to take charge of myself and run my own life," said Mary. "We even went to Washington D.C., where they make the laws and I learned a lot."

Mary is ready to give back. "I think I would really like to help another person," she said. "I am a good reader and I think I could really help some who needs me. I could be a facilitator."

Mary is still a prolific writer. According to Neeta, Mary keeps a journal and records her life through letters – sometimes two or three a week. "Mary has always wanted to write a book about her life," said Neeta. "I have helped her write short stories and anecdotes from her life which she has shared at conferences all across the nation."

"She is a very goal-oriented, visionary woman," said Neeta. "She has always set small goals for herself and worked hard to achieve them. Her goal now is to get back on her own in an apartment and write this book. She really wants to help other people live a life of self-direction."

In June, Mary and Neeta will be revisiting Mary's budget and making plans for the coming year. "I hope to take more computer classes and get more help writing my book," Mary said. When asked where she would start, she replied glibly, "You really have to start with the day your were born."



"My family has grown closer now because they see that I can live independently with the right support... They believe in me."

- Mary Schmitt

Just For the Record: Journaling

What is Journaling?

Journaling is a highly personal form of self-expression. Keeping in a journal enables people to learn more about themselves and better understand who they are and why they do the things they do. This self-understanding develops as they reflect upon their life experiences and the feelings that accompany them. It provides a safe place to record feelings and experiences, and to express creatively without having to face comments or criticism from others.

Q: What are the benefits of journaling?

The benefits of journaling have been scientifically proven. Journaling can:

- be an effective tool for stress management and personal growth.
- unlock creativity and promote self-healing.
- help a person gain confidence and a sense of control.
- be a healthful release for feelings and tensions.
- be helpful in gaining perspective on emotions.
- be helpful in resolving the past.
- be a path to self-awareness and self-knowledge.

Q: How can I get started?

Buy a Journal or Scrapbook: The kind of a journal or scrapbook you use is important. Choose a beautiful blank book, a more functional notebook or just use your computer. If you opt for a blank book, you can decide between lined or blank pages, with a variety of pens.

Set Aside Time: One of the most difficult aspects of journaling is not the journaling itself, but finding time. It's important to block off about twenty minutes each day to write or record. Many people prefer to journal in the morning as a way to start their day, or before bed, as a way to reflect upon and process the day's events.

Just Begin: Don't think about what to say; just begin writing, drawing or speaking.

continues on page 4

Supports and Accommodations

If you are providing support to someone who will be starting a journal, consider a "scrapbook" style journal that has space for both pictures and words.

Use visual prompts, such as photographs of important people and events, ticket stubs, brochures and other 'souvenirs.'

Use computer software programs or books about emotions that can help the person identify and pinpoint feelings. Posters or even pictures clipped from magazines that depict feelings can also be helpful.

Keep a word bank of "feeling words" ranging from basic emotions (mad, sad, glad, bad) to more complex feelings (shame, guilt, relief, rage, embarrassment) to help the person.

Use drawings, colored pens and pencils, and even textured fabrics to record emotion.

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new directions

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Journaling *continued from page 3*

Record Thoughts and Feelings: Try not to simply vent negative emotions or catalog events. Record feelings and thoughts surrounding emotional events. Try to “relive” events emotionally, construct solutions and find ‘the lesson’ in the experience. If you are supporting someone for whom words are not easy, try looking at pictures or offering a “word bank” of basic emotions (mad, sad, glad, bad) to help the person identify the feelings associated with the experience.

Keep Your Journal Private: If you’re worried that someone else may read your journal, you’re more likely to self-censor, and you won’t achieve the same benefits from writing. Get a book that locks or keep your book in a locked or hidden place. If using a computer, you can password-protect your journal so you’ll feel safe when you write. If you are supporting someone by writing as they speak, do so without comment or judgement, and promise to maintain absolute confidentiality and privacy.

STUCK???

Here are some prompts to help you begin the creative process:

- What are your dreams?
- What is your possible purpose in life?
- What are your childhood memories and surrounding feelings?
- Where would you like to be in two years?
- What was the best (or worst) day of your life?
- If you could have three wishes, what would they be?
- What was important to you five years ago, and what’s important to you now?
- What are you grateful for?

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